



Ronald J. Riccio
Dean of Seton Hall University School of Law, 1988-1999

From the Bench: The Riccio Years

*The Hon. Daniel J. O'Hern**

But for a hanging curve ball, we might today be paying tribute to Ron Riccio for his achievements in major league baseball. Instead of pursuing the career opportunities that were available to him as a varsity baseball pitcher at Seton Hall University, Ron elected instead to attend the Seton Hall University School of Law. His life thereafter in many ways fulfilled the American dream.

After his federal court clerkship with Judge Lawrence A. Whipple, Jr., this distinguished son of a Hudson County family rose swiftly to prominence in the legal profession. He excelled in fields of commercial litigation and soon represented important clients in state and federal courts and became a partner in the firm of Robinson, Wayne & Greenberg.

Ron excelled in every aspect of his life. He excelled as a son, as a student, as a practicing lawyer, as a dean, as a husband, as a parent, and as a friend. He has, in every facet of his life, been caring, dedicated, honest, and compassionate. Although he has much to be proud of in his own life, he is extremely proud of the accomplishments of his wife, Nina, and his children, Nicole and Julie, who demonstrate Ron's qualities of warmth, understanding, and integrity.

In 1988, he left the private practice of law to become the Dean of the Seton Hall University School of Law. He succeeded the successful tenures of Deans Rooney, Loftus, Irving, Degnan, and Defeis. His decade of leadership will be remembered as a period of remarkable growth and accomplishment for the Law School.

First and foremost among his achievements is his extraordinary ability to hold together and strengthen a distinguished faculty of forty-one full-time members and ninety adjunct instructors, many of whom devote countless hours of volunteer teaching to Seton Hall. I had firsthand experience as a member of a visiting committee to know that 1988 was a period of uncertainty for the Law School. The school's facilities, and most importantly its library, were greatly in need of renovation. The faculty awaited new leadership.

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Ron's patience, diligence and, most of all, his concern for students commended his deanship to the faculty. He was not just an administrator. He was a teacher. He taught in the classroom and in the halls of the Law School. Building on the foundations laid by the worthy deans before him, and by the long line of its alumni, Seton Hall Law School has achieved the thirty-seventh rank among more than 170 law schools of this nation according to the *National Jurist*. Ron is most proud of that.

Second in importance of achievement has been his relationship with the students of the school. He has been able to continue to draw to Seton Hall Law School an academically strong student body, diverse in gender, race, age, and experience. I have attended many functions at the Seton Hall University School of Law. On each of these occasions, I have been struck by the fact that the Dean appears to know, on a first-name basis, so many members of the student body. Despite the rigorous demands required of a dean, Ron has consistently taught first-year students to ensure that he knows a substantial portion of the student population. It is his custom to address the students as they commence their years at the Law School and to seek to impress upon them the values of professionalism and integrity. Many schools have welcomed students with the classic "Look to your left, look to your right . . . when you graduate there is a good chance that one of those people will not be graduating with you." Instead, Ron impresses upon students that there is a good chance that one of the people beside them will one day be a judge, a professor, or a partner in a law firm. His commencement addresses have echoed the same themes of professionalism and pride. It is no small accomplishment that a law school located on a busy street in the heart of Newark, New Jersey, has been ranked second nationally in student satisfaction.

Ron's third achievement is seen in the new law school's building. He had the task of arranging the financing of construction of the \$37 million facility, which opened in 1991. I have never visited the Seton Hall Law School when I have not been impressed with the bustling presence of good cheer and enthusiasm shown by the students and faculty. In no large measure, this warmth is due to the excellence of the architecture that manages to blend open spaces and light with the practical needs of lecture halls. The design reflects the literal and figurative accessibility promoted by the Dean among students, administration, faculty, staff, alumni, and guests. The school catalog describes the Law School as "inviting, hospitable, comfortable, majestic and collegial." Its impeccable appearance is an out-

ward symbol of the pride in the institution that the Dean has nurtured. This new law school has risen in shining beauty to become an important symbol of the School's continuing investment in the City of Newark and its urban environment. Instead of leaving Newark as did many organizations, the Dean reaffirmed the Law School's commitment to revitalizing Newark, which is now known as the Renaissance City. Thanks in part to the mission of the Law School, which seeks to offer a high quality legal education to a diverse student body, that student body will always include a good many first-generation graduate students. Given the opportunity through programs like the LEO Program, educationally disadvantaged students from the local community may rise from humble beginnings to a place among the skilled professionals of our society.

Just as important as the legal skills Ron instills in the students are the personal skills and moral values that the Law School seeks to nurture. Respect, sensitivity, and civility are among the most important qualities a human being, let alone an attorney, should possess, and Ron endeavors to equip each graduate with those characteristics.

In recent times, Dean Riccio has had to balance the academic freedoms of the school and its students with the religious freedoms of the school's founders. Students are encouraged to advance their specific expressive purposes in pursuit of their academic and intellectual freedom. As always, Ron's primary concern is for the students, especially a concern for their physical well-being when the exercise of their academic rights possibly exposes them to protests from others expressing protected rights in a perhaps more forceful way.

I personally believe that the last chapter of Ron Riccio's deanship has not yet been written. The students of this age will be the leaders of another age. When they become managing partners, not just of New Jersey law firms, but of large national law firms, and when they become heads of executive agencies of the national government, we will have known that Ron Riccio's dream for Seton Hall Law School has been fulfilled. The achievements of this new generation of alumni will be in large measure due to the tireless efforts of Dean Ron Riccio. He has provided remarkable leadership to the Seton Hall Law School.

If life were baseball, we would say that Ron hit a home run during his tenure as Dean, and because "it's not over, 'till its over," the benefits of his leadership will continue to be seen for years to come.